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‘May I be alive when I die!’ Dreaming of (re-)animation in Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye

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Prayer: Oh God! May I be alive when I die.

- D. W. Winnicott¹

If one supreme ‘failure’ links the protagonists of Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye, it is in relation to their ontology, that is, the way in which they might be said to exist or not exist in the world. These characters do not truly live *live*, and in exactly the same way, they fail to properly *die*. They are, instead, trapped somewhere between life and death, not unlike zombies, vampires, or other uncanny, spectral, fundamentally unanchored beings of the supernatural. In this chapter I would like to try to unpack the strangely ‘undead’ quality that permeates the worlds of Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye, by focusing, to begin with, on the analogous way in which all three writers play – in a remarkably ghoulish manner – with the representation of suicide. Refusing to kill their protagonists off cleanly (and so perhaps to effect some kind of cathartic end to the stifling sickness that has governed their worlds thus far), the three authors instead toy with sometimes farcical, sometimes awe-inspiring experiments in the possibility of death’s – particularly suicidal death’s – fantastical reversal. After examining a few instances of bewildering pseudo-resurrection in Flaubert and Beckett, I shall suggest some potentially instructive

¹ Quoted in Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, (London: Fontana, 1988), 19.

psychical frameworks through which to read the failure of their characters to finally die. In the last part of the chapter, I turn to some examples of fantastically reversed death and suicide in the work of Marie NDiaye. NDiaye, I argue, underlines, even more strongly than Flaubert and Beckett, the specifically psychoanalytic dimensions of 'undead' phenomena in these texts, as well as teasing out the politicizable implications of 'zombification' with which Flaubert and Beckett merely flirt.

Towards the 'end' of the unending and apparently unendable *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), the anti-novel which Flaubert once claimed in a letter to Louise Colet was driving him into his own grave, the two eponymous protagonists decide to put an end to things in a double-suicide:

Et ils examinèrent la question du suicide.

Où est le mal de rejeter un fardeau qui vous écrase ? et de commettre une action ne nuisant à personne ? Si elle offensait Dieu, aurions-nous ce pouvoir ? Ce n'est point une lâcheté, bien qu'on dise, et l'insolence est belle de bafouer, même à son détriment, ce que les hommes estiment le plus.

Ils délibérèrent sur le genre de mort.²

But after a series of failures in every activity to which they set their minds, it is, of course, inevitable that Bouvard and Pécuchet will fail at death too. On the verge of hanging themselves on Christmas Eve, they are drawn out of the attic of putative death by the angelic sounds of midnight mass.

Some fifty years later, a young Samuel Beckett would play with precisely the same brand of black comedy in his elaboration of another failed double-suicide. In the bizarre collection of short stories published in 1934 under the name *More Pricks than Kicks*, Beckett shows us his charmlessly neurotic student hero Belacqua – a name taken, significantly, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in a series of stupid and depressing activities, which range from trying to boil a lobster alive, to himself dying in hospital after a minor operation. Before this trivial death, however, (a death which, as we shall see later, is far from the end of Belacqua), in the story 'Love and Lethe', Belacqua and one of his girlfriends, Ruby, make a suicide pact. They do not carry out the self-execution, however, as the gun they have brought along for the purpose goes off by accident, an event which the irreligious Belacqua interprets as the finger of God, 'for once'.³ A more famous failed

² Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1999), 322

³ Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks* (London: Calder, 1993), 104.

Beckettian double-suicide was, of course, first played out some twenty years later, in 1953, on the Paris stage, in *En attendant Godot*. The protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon converse twice about the possibility of hanging themselves. During the first conversation, this method of suicide, whilst sexually quite exciting ('Ce serait un moyen de bander')⁴ is ultimately dismissed as a possibility: there is no sufficiently strong tree in the vicinity. As for the second time the topic arises, the problem is that the belt they have available for the job is too weak: they would have to go and find some rope. The play ends, as is well known, with their failure to move.

In all of Flaubert's and Beckett's grotesque suicide vignettes, the protagonists are made to fail at the very act which might itself be interpreted as a successful acceptance of failure. Suicide is presented as the limit of failure, as it were, the failure which itself cannot be allowed at any cost to work out well. Bouvard's, Pécuchet's, Belacqua's, Vladimir's and Estragon's suicidal bunglings are played with by Flaubert and Beckett in a simultaneously absurd and mock-religious manner, as pseudo-divine chance occurrences draw the heroes away back from the brink, and back into an existence in which all is conducted in the twilight of *half-life*. However, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), as everybody knows, the heroine does, eventually manage to kill herself successfully. Emma Bovary actually dies. The narrator tells us so in no uncertain terms. Following a succession of grimly explicit descriptions of her death-throes, it is announced with characteristically Flaubertian concision: 'Elle n'existait plus'.⁵ And yet even this, perhaps the most famous suicide in French literature, quickly metamorphoses into something uncannily living, something that isn't *quite* death as we know it. In the weeks and months following his wife's unexpected disappearance, Charles Bovary experiences Emma as more bewilderingly present than ever. Her suicide is somehow reversed. Charles finds himself infected by Emma, invaded by her, starting somehow to become her:

Pour lui plaire, comme si elle vivait encore, il adopta ses prédilections, ses idées ; il s'acheta des bottes vernies, il prit l'usage des cravates blanches. Il mettait du cosmétique à ses moustaches, il souscrivit comme elle des billets à ordre. Elle le corrompait par delà le tombeau.⁶

⁴ Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1985), 11.

⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Arvensa, 2014), 279.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 289.

In the days immediately following the suicide, Emma's body seems literally literally to be alive. We are told that she 'avait l'air de dormir' (281); her orifices continue to twitch and expel fluid; like all troublesome corpses, she simply won't keep still and act like one. Her father, le père Rouault, has a hallucination on his way to the Bovary house in which he thinks he sees Emma's walking corpse: 'Puis elle lui apparaissait morte. Elle était là, devant lui, étendue sur le dos, au milieu de la route' (283). As for Charles, he begins to entertain fantasies of vodou-esque reanimation, casting himself in the role of romantic black magician: 'Il se rappelait des histoires de catalepsie, les miracles du magnétisme ; et il se disait qu'en le voulant extrêmement, il parviendrait peut-être à la ressusciter. Une fois même il se pencha vers elle, et il cria tout bas: "Emma ! Emma!"' (279). Emma Bovary, dead though she may be, metamorphoses in these final pages of *Madame Bovary*, then, into something like a *revenante*, a female Lazarus *manquée*.

Again we find Beckett, half a century later, playing with exactly the same post-death conceit as Flaubert, but pushing it into the realms of the downright insane. In the short story 'Echo's Bones', written in the early 1930s with the rest of *More Pricks than Kicks*, but only published in 2014,⁷ Belacqua, the layabout hero we have already briefly discussed, actually comes back from the grave to continue his absurd adventures for just a little while longer in what was supposed to be the collection's final story. Having failed at his double-suicide with Ruby, Belacqua has finally died in hospital following a minor operation. Except that he hasn't. Like the Dante-esque character after whom he is named, Belacqua floats in a purgatorial space of everyday horror: he chats to a cemetery grounds man intent on stealing his non-existent corpse; he is ravished by the exotically-named Zaborovna Privet; he even fathers a child for the wife of a local giant and landowner, Lord Gall of Wormwood. 'So it goes in the world', the story dryly concludes, just as the one that preceded it, 'Draff', the story of Belacqua's burial, did.

Both Flaubert and Beckett seem intent on blurring the boundaries between life and death – but they do so in a very particular manner.

⁷ The original publishers asked Beckett to remove the story from the collection, calling it a 'nightmare', and adding that it would 'depress the sales very considerably' (quoted on the first page of the introduction to Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

Deathliness exists at the very heart of their protagonists' life in the form of unshakable, self-extinguishing depression. Emma Bovary, Frédéric Moreau, Bouvard and Pécuchet, Vladimir and Estragon, Belacqua, Watt, Malone and Molloy are all haunted by something utterly blank and lifeless, a ghostly, niggling need to somehow prove an increasingly doubtful existence through acts that are largely devoid of meaning. When death does arrive, if it arrives, it tends to herald a phase of existence largely indistinguishable from the phase that has preceded it: something akin to life haunts these characters' deaths, just as something akin to death haunted their lives. Whilst death and/or the decision to commit suicide is initially presented as an existentially significant turning-point, a marker that may succeed in bringing the stultified narrative towards a kind of mad and necessary breakdown, Flaubert and Beckett quickly convert the potential cataclysm of death into its zombified, affectless counterpart. No relief is possible here, not even the relief of death: there is only the continuation of spectral non-life.

One could attempt to read these flirtations with resurrection or salvation from suicide in redemptive, romantic or quasi-religiously transcendent terms – the Holy Fathers Flaubert and Beckett bringing their protagonists somehow back from the brink in a desperate artistic attempt to give their dead, depressed babies life again – but one would probably be mistaken. Instead, these post-suicidal 'returns' seem to function as absolute proof, if any more were needed, that no break, no metamorphosis, no recovery from lifelong disaster, can actually be achieved. Elissa Marder points out in *Dead Time*, her ambitious study of temporality and modernity in Baudelaire and Flaubert, that one of the particularly tenacious sicknesses affecting the world of *Madame Bovary* is the inability to mourn. In a particularly interesting passage on the death of Emma's mother, Marder notes that this mother is conspicuously absent throughout the novel, only being referred to when she dies, a death which is experienced by Emma, despite strenuous attempts at romanticizing it, as formless, unrepresentable, an affectless black hole of non-feeling:

Emma's dead mother is perhaps the most opaque and unreadable figure in the entire text of *Madame Bovary*. This figure becomes unreadable in part because she is barely written – existing only as the void that serves as the apparent origin of all future non-events including, of course, Emma's warped nonrelation to her own daughter, Berthe [...] Emma's attempts to mourn the

mother's death are doomed to repeat the very formlessness of this maternal non-event.⁸

Emma's mother, in Marder's reading, was 'dead' before she actually died, just as Emma is 'dead' (as a mother), before she takes the poison. And when Berthe finally discovers her father Charles dead on the novel's final page, the child is unable, significantly, to distinguish his dead body from his live one: 'Papa, viens, donc! dit-elle. Et, croyant qu'il voulait jouer, elle le poussa doucement. Il tomba par terre. Il était mort.'⁹ I find it impossible not to juxtapose Marder's reading of parental death in *Madame Bovary* as death that occurs long before physical expiry, often in the form of a kind of unrepresentable non-intimacy between parent and child, with Franco-Egyptian psychoanalyst André Green's account of the so-called 'dead mother complex', *le complexe de la mère morte*, wherein babies and infants find themselves internalizing a spectral, ghostly perception of their mother or primary carer who, for some unspecified reason, is unable to be emotionally present for the child.¹⁰ According to Green, the result of such failed bonding can be the development within the child (and later adult) of an unshakable sense of him or herself as psychically dead even though s/he is physically alive. Flaubert's and Beckett's worlds of zombified protagonists and resurrected suicides gain an incredible new layer of potential meaning when considered against the background of Green's 'mère morte'. For these characters, spectral and hole-ridden as they are in life, death – and the thing beyond both life and death – tends to emerge from precisely the ghoulishly 'in between' parent-child space described by Green in his essay, a space which infects them, we might say, with this sense of both themselves and their caregivers as members of the living dead community: affectless and unreachable.

In Flaubert's *Education sentimentale* (1869), Frédéric Moreau's neurasthenic 'passion' for Mme Arnoux grotesquely mimics the coercive and vaguely incestuous nothingness at the heart of his dealings with his mother, whilst in his *Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874), the saint is tempted towards suicide by Death in the form of an

⁸ Elissa Marder, *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 140.

⁹ *Madame Bovary*, 294.

¹⁰ André Green, 'La mère morte', in *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).

old woman. As for Emma Bovary, an emotionally unavailable mother to her daughter Berthe at the best of times, when she does finally, physically die, her expiry seems to bring her tantalizing, spectral, (non-) maternal inaccessibility to its ghastly apotheosis. As the narrator teasingly relates – ‘Tous s’approchèrent. Elle n’existait plus’ – the reader must now crane, like the assembled onlookers, like a frustrated child, to get a glimpse of this now literally dead mother, a woman who in life could not be ‘seen’, and who now in death is an equally impenetrable spectacle of non-relationality. Beckett’s representations of parents and caregivers seem equally inextricably linked to his evocations of failed communication and omnipresent death-in-life. In *Fin de partie* (1957), Hamm’s dustbin-dwelling rag-dolls of parents, Nagg and Nell, permeate the spectral loneliness of the entire play, seeming unintentionally to mock Hamm and Clov from their trash-can graves with incomprehensibly insouciant tales of youthful misadventures. In the text which preceded *More Pricks than Kicks* (and which also featured the character of Belacqua), entitled *Dreams of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), Beckett used the foul but highly evocative phrase ‘womb-tomb’, whilst, more famously, in *En attendant Godot*, we are told that women ‘accouchent à cheval sur une tombe’.¹¹ *All that Fall* (1956) contains a character who was ‘never properly born’, a phrase allegedly uttered by Carl Jung at a lecture attended by Beckett and his then-psychotherapist Wilfred Bion in 1934.¹² Beckett’s obsession with the inextricable association of the parental function with the begetting of dead people by dead people is perhaps never so starkly illustrated as by Belacqua’s unexpectedly becoming a father in ‘Echo’s Bones’ precisely at the moment of his return from the grave.

Beckett’s interminably painful and frustrating relationship with his own mother (who physically died in 1950) is well documented.¹³ But what strikes me as being of particular interest in the various accounts of this particular mother-son dyad is the way in which Beckett appears to have experienced his mother’s effect on him as so peculiarly deadening. It is as if she was able, even when nowhere near him, to invade his being in such a way as to arrest the workings of his life and soul, making him unable to think, speak or write, afflicted as he was

¹¹ *En attendant Godot*, 83.

¹² See Steven Connor, ‘Beckett and Bion’, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/beckbion/>

¹³ See Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Picador, 1979).

by a strange ‘verbal constipation’¹⁴. In a fascinating essay that reflects on Beckett’s decision to write in French as a potential ruse to break free of the paralysing effects of his ‘internal mother’, Patrick Casement observes that

When all is not well for the child, he may not be able to play because the potential play area has become a sterile or persecutory world. This may occur if the mother is too long absent, leaving the child too depressed or too preoccupied to be able to play. Or [...] the space may be so dominated and intruded upon as to be effectively unavailable to the child. [...] [Beckett] urgently had to fight back, to preserve from suffocation his creative ability, for to give in to these pressures would have been to succumb to the worst kind of death. He would have become dead in himself, entombed within a body that had the perverse audacity to go on limping on through ‘life’ until a some-other-time death, which never seemed to come.¹⁵

Casement comes close to describing what André Green and some subsequent analysts of Green’s ‘dead mother complex’ manage to articulate so wonderfully, namely the paradoxical possession of the child by a suffocating maternal presence that is so overwhelming precisely because it has always had an oddly absent, spectral quality. The mother has not related as a present, living person with the child, and what that child subsequently ends up internalizing of the relationship is an over-filling deadness. As Christopher Bollas so beautifully frames it: ‘Her laugh is not the giggle of the mother at play in peek-a-boo, but the haunting bellow of a ghost who leaves the abandoned with a lifelong riddle to haunt the self’,¹⁶ whilst in an equally inspired meditation on Green, Jed Sekoff remarks:

What we find in the dead mother complex is an extraordinary vigilance, a relentless energy gathered around the proposition that no life is possible beyond the boundary of the dead mother’s embrace. Peace of mind is a rare commodity in the dead mother complex. For in essence, the complex is a kind of death march within the mind, or more specifically, a kind of war of the mind against the self, against the soma, and against the affective resonances of the psyche. All spontaneous uprisings of the emotions, of the body, of phantasy, represent a threat to the regime of the dead mother. The mind is organised as an object whose function is to keep at bay, at all costs, any striving that might interrupt the vigilant watch of the subject over the vault of the ‘dead objects’.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 94.

¹⁵ Patrick Casement, *Learning from Life: Becoming a Psychoanalyst* (London: Routledge, 2006), 109.

¹⁶ Christopher Bollas, ‘Dead mother, dead child’ in Gregorio Kohon (ed.), *The Dead Mother: The Work of André Green* (London: Routledge, 1999), 107.

¹⁷ Jed Sekoff, ‘The undead: necromancy and the inner world’, in *op. cit.*, 119.

Thus the unnamed narrator of Beckett's novel *Molloy* will remark, noting the way in which his as yet unburied dead mother has come to hijack his very identity:

La mort de ma mère, par exemple. Était-elle déjà morte à mon arrivée ? Ou n'est-elle morte que plus tard ? Je veux dire morte à enterrer. Je ne sais pas. Peut-être ne l'a-t-on pas enterrée encore. Quoi qu'il en soit, c'est moi qui ai sa chambre. Je couche dans son lit. Je fais dans son vase. J'ai pris sa place. Je dois lui ressembler de plus en plus. Il ne me manque plus qu'un fils. J'en ai un quelque part peut-être. Mais je ne crois pas. Il serait vieux maintenant, presque autant que moi.¹⁸

The 'dead mother' figure of the play *Rockaby* (1980), can similarly be found echoed and morphed backwards across time in the young adult male of *Murphy* (1938): both old woman and young man are fixed to their interminably rocking rocking-chairs, locked into a pseudo-comforting, rhythmic movement that serves only to underline to addictive emptiness of a maternal care that never actually arrives. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Bouvard and Pécuchet, Emma Bovary's onlookers, and Green's baby, Beckett's prose figures – Belacqua, Murphy, Molloy and the rest – are stranded in between life and death, aliveness and suicide, the living mother and the dead one.

I have written extensively about the figure of the 'dead parent' (especially the mother) in the work of Marie NDiaye,¹⁹ and will conclude this chapter with a return to NDiaye, as it is in her writing, I think, that this idea of human zombification in conjunction with tantalizingly 'spectral' parenting is most relentlessly explored. As with Flaubert and Beckett, in the world of NDiaye blank and unrepresentable parent-child non-relationships abound. And in precisely the same fashion, NDiaye will half-kill off her protagonists, often in what appears to be failed suicide or something emotionally resembling it, bringing them back in improbably metamorphosed or spectral form. Like her precursors, then, NDiaye presents depressed human life and post-death as existing on the same wretched continuum, and proceeding out of an original familial context of ghostly nothingness akin to André Green's prescription of 'dead mother complex'. In her magisterial novel *Rosie Carpe* (2001), the eponymous heroine, a blankly psychotic mother of a small, sickly boy called Titi, concludes at the end of the book's second part that: 'Je suis

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Minuit, 1951), 8.

¹⁹ See, for example, Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

au bout du rouleau'.²⁰ This statement carries a deeply suicidal affect, coming as it does after a series of seemingly unbearable events: impregnation under the gaze of a pornographic film camera; a second impregnation (abortive) by a neighbour who breaks Titi's arm; a third impregnation by an unknown entity; abandonment by her family; a soul-destroying job. And yet when Part Three begins, Rosie has not in fact committed suicide, but has travelled to sunny Guadeloupe, becoming 'reborn' there, for a time, as a red and powerful siren, only to disintegrate again, along with little Titi (whom she tries to kill, or rather, to allow to die), by the end of the book having 'atteint le point le plus extrême de la passivité et de l'indifférence'.²¹ In the earlier *Un temps de saison* (1994), the character of Rose and her child mysteriously disappear, before turning up halfway through the novel in the form of dematerialized spectres. In these texts, suicide seems to hover at the frontiers of the text's consciousness, only to be batted back by an improbable transformation which can only be temporary: half-dead mother and child half-die again and again, until they can no longer be described as human beings. The later photo-text *Autoportrait en vert* (2005) is positively littered with half-dead mothers and children, some of whom actually take the suicidal plunge, only to bounce back in depressively insouciant fashion. The narrator's neighbour Katia Depetiteville, to whom the narrator feels a strangely child-like attachment, leaps without warning from her balcony, only to pick herself up off the grass with 'une souplesse insolite'.²² Later the narrator is told that this woman died several years earlier. Another woman known to the narrator, 'la première femme d'Ivan', hangs herself in a cellar, but is seen around town some time later, exuding a disquieting 'plaisir sexuel qui était très visible dans ses yeux'.²³ NDiaye's protagonists are haunted by the pseudo-suicides of blank and affectless parent-figures, who fail to deliver a sense of relief either through living, or dying, or living through death. All relationality is instead rendered more gnawingly spectral than ever, exactly as André Green describes the half-in, half-out non-connectivity of the 'dead mother complex', at the heart of which lies not so much a dead mother as a zombified one, whom the child finds impossible to kill off

²⁰ Marie NDiaye, *Rosie Carpe* (Paris: Minuit, 2001), 169.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 334.

²² Marie NDiaye, *Autoportrait en vert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2005), 24.

²³ *Op. cit.*, 58.

internally, even when s/he is an adult and attempting to construct new relationships. It is this uncanny ability the zombie-parent has to block the protagonist's capacity for relationality with him or herself, or with potentially nourishing others, that most appears to obsess NDiaye. The fantastical returns from suicide or pseudo-suicide are no longer, as in Flaubert or Beckett, merely a corollary of a universe in which nothing can be mourned and nobody can truly live or die: they are the signal that self-love, selfhood and subjectivity will be forever out of reach, stifled as they are by the icy grip of a phantom-mother who was never actually 'there', and yet who stubbornly refuses to leave.

Nowhere does NDiaye illustrate better what may be at stake *psycho-socially* in the 'dead' mother's refusal to die than in her early novel *En famille* (1990). Here, it is the young protagonist Fanny, daughter of a blank and affectless woman known simply as 'la mère de Fanny', who commits a sort of suicide when she rushes into the snapping jaws of her hostile family's dogs, and is subsequently ripped to pieces under her unconcerned mother's very nose. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Fanny is resurrected a few chapters later, discovered by her previously contemptuous Aunt Colette in an unexpectedly acceptable form – before her death Fanny had been inexplicably tainted: now, post-death, she has a rosy glow and something about her which is described as 'blanchâtre'.²⁴ Fanny's refusal to die properly, her seeming determination to come back from suicide in what demands to be read as an ethnically cleansed state, adds yet another dimension to the paradigm of zombification we have uncovered in the failed deaths of Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye. For just as Emma Bovary's haunting deathliness when alive and liveliness when dead demand to be seen in the context not only of her own mother's 'deadness' but also in that of the spectacularizing and spectralizing alienation of Second Empire capitalism, so too Fanny's inability to lie still, to rest in peace either when alive or dead, must be seen, I suggest, as a symptom of 'disconnectedness' at simultaneously familial, economic, gendered and racialized levels. Born and brought up 'astride of a grave', as Beckett might have put it, in a society which appears to worship only appearance and sameness, Fanny's only option, it seems, is to kill herself little by little, in the vain hope that she may become as affectless as those around her. Unfortunately for

²⁴ Marie NDiaye, *En famille* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 211.

her, the physical ‘improvement’ heralded by her first death and resurrection does itself not last for long, and Fanny is last seen in the closing pages of the novel an ‘imperceptible silhouette’ which ‘ne remuait pas plus qu’un cadavre’.²⁵

In her portrait of the zombie as a young woman, Marie NDiaye takes the postmodern, dissociated, emotionally orphaned self’s failure to live, to die or to mourn towards a place even Flaubert and Beckett never dreamed of. Just as Green predicts in his essay, NDiaye’s Fanny will grow up into a young adult bent on making sense of her exclusion from her mother’s universe through the construction of a vertiginous edifice of false rationalisations. For Green insists on the ontological destabilisation of the dead mother’s child, an exacerbated existential unseating that arises from the child’s not being able to grasp why it has (apparently) lost the love of its caregiver. Eventually coming to the conclusion that *it* is the one responsible for the mother’s disappearance and apparent spectralisation, the infant begins a potentially endless process of self-accusation, turning against itself in a relentless quest to discover the reason it has been abandoned. For the child of a dead mother, the world loses all meaning: with the loss of emotional connectivity comes the arrival of a multitude of psychic gaps and holes, as nothing seems to make sense any more. As Green notes:

Il y a eu enkystement de l’objet et effacement de sa trace par désinvestissement, il y a eu identification primaire à la mère morte et transformation de l’identification positive en identification négative, c’est-à-dire au trou laissé par le désinvestissement et non à l’objet.²⁶

Fanny’s gruesome development as a subject characterised by an identification with a hole and not with an object is anticipated by Green’s specification that, following the infant’s problematic internalisation of a ‘dead’ maternal object, the growing subject will experience the most extreme difficulty in internalising any new ‘real’ object at all, instead forever

en quête d’un objet inintrojectable, sans possibilité d’y renoncer ou de le perdre et sans guère plus de possibilité d’accepter son introjection dans le Moi investi par la mère morte. En somme, les objets du sujet restent toujours à la limite du Moi, ni complètement dedans, ni tout à fait dehors.²⁷

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 305.

²⁶ Green, ‘La mère morte’, 235.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, 234.

Is long-lost Tante Léda, whom Fanny erects as her fantasmatic, mythical saviour, not the ultimate unsymbolisable, yawning, pseudo-maternal hole? Nobody seems very sure of her existence, while endless contradictory stories about her identity and whereabouts seem to abound, without her essential aura of nothingness becoming any more solid. One alleged photograph of Léda 'represents' her as 'une confuse masse grise' (*En famille*, 58). Meanwhile, Fanny finds that she herself is turning into no more than a hole in family photographs: '[Seul manquait] le visage de Fanny elle-même, qui n'était plus qu'un trou déchiqueté sur la ronde poitrine de sa mère' (*En famille*, 174).

As her character sinks deeper and deeper into blank dementia, Fanny becomes progressively constituted by a patchwork of cavities that are impossible to fill. Following her literal breaking apart by her maternal family's dogs, she will move further and further towards chronic dematerialisation, ending her quest in the dead-end shed of Tante Colette, an unrepresentable, gaseous shadow-ghoul. Fanny could thus be said, in Arnold H. Modell's words, to journey all the way to 'total identification with the mother's affective deadness',²⁸ a full-blown auto-zombification that Modell labels 'dead mother syndrome'. Elsewhere in NDiaye's universe we find a number of other young women who, having spent their lives acting out various responses to the complex, eventually reach a place of total deadness (one thinks of the grey, melting Rosie Carpe of that novel's final pages, or the ghost-Daughter in the 2011 play *Les Grandes Personnes*), seemingly in fully fantastical identification with the dead mother. As little Mina puts it in the 2003 play *Papa doit manger*, she and her sister Ami are their mother's 'chères petites mortes'.²⁹ Once we begin to read the inexorable decline of Fanny – and of so many other NDiayan protagonists – retrospectively, via Green and the dead mother, it becomes increasingly clear that these literary depictions of disintegration, fragmentation and a progressive deadening of the self have a psychoanalytic pre-history within which they can be helpfully and provocatively understood. But NDiaye's vast body of plays and fictions offers us something Green's short, brilliant essay, alas, does not: an enormous canvas on which to explore these phenomena properly, on which to repeat, modify and work through the complex in

²⁸ Arnold H. Modell, 'The dead mother syndrome and the reconstruction of trauma' in Kohon (ed.), 84.

²⁹ Marie NDiaye, *Papa doit manger* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), 12.

a variety of aesthetic frames and social contexts. For NDiaye's blank hauntings play out differently according to the different limitations and possibilities offered to the protagonists caught up in them. Her universe offers us a remarkable opportunity to follow the dead mother all the way, to observe her in different guises and colours, to learn and grow from the rare occasions on which she and/or her child manage to avoid lifelong blankness and/or total dissolution. Becoming a totally disintegrated 'hole' is not an inevitable outcome for all the children of 'dead' mothers. Arnold H. Modell notes that the complex may even give rise to what could be viewed as a 'positive' response in the child, who might potentially develop, for example, 'a compensatory hypersensitivity to the inner state of the other' (Modell, 'The dead mother syndrome', 84).

We need to develop the community of undead failures formed by Flaubert, Beckett and NDiaye, and analytically enveloped by Green, in order to pursue the sheer richness of their (presumably) unconscious conversation about internalised 'zombification' and its various potential consequences. Perhaps, though, it is only in following the NDiaye detail of their joint diagnosis that we may be able to move forward all the way towards what Green might call a *discours vivant*. In the short story 'Une journée de Brulard' (2004), NDiaye's narrator momentarily contemplates the possibility of a world in which not only the wretched protagonist Ève Brulard is haunted by a spectral mother, but in which everybody finds themselves similarly invaded:

[E]t cependant, pensa Brulard, elle ignorait une chose: si, pour chacun de ces vacanciers, une mère Brulard propre à chacun d'eux et que chacun nommait à sa façon secrète[...] avait pris la forme et l'allure de la montagne, épiant, jugeant, se croyant seule et chacun, comme Brulard, la croyant seule et unique.³⁰

Like Green, then, NDiaye seems interested in extending the phenomenon of the dead mother from singularity to archetype, drawing out its widespread, even potentially universal application. Ève Brulard, like Fanny, Rosie, Lagrand, Mina, Norah and so many other dissolving, disintegrating or otherwise disorientated NDiaye children of the dead, may half-live, half-die their condition within the fantastical contours of NDiaye's extreme fictional and theatrical

³⁰ Marie NDiaye, 'Une journée de Brulard', in NDiaye, *Tous mes amis* (Paris: Minuit, 2004), 123.

universe. But the poignancy of their experiences nevertheless sets many a reader on an unsettling journey towards the heart of his or her own sensations, however fleeting, however disavowed, of blankness, emptiness or deadness. NDiaye's repeated depictions of a veritable epidemic of parental relational failure at large in contemporary Western systems, force us, with greater intensity even than Green's writings, and with wider application than either Beckett or Flaubert, to consider how entire aspects of our societies, from cradle to grave, via school, family and office, cultivate the development of internal holes that may well, if left ignored and untreated, become too yawning to fill. Her development of the dead mother complex (moreover extending it to 'dead fathers' and filtering it through 'race') could be said, then, to perform a crucial therapeutic – and potentially political – act, namely, in Jed Sekoff's words, that of 'constituting absence, in place of an adherence to deadness' (Sekoff, 'The undead', 122). In giving us new signs and symbols with which to conceive of their unbearable failure, NDiaye's dead parents and their unfortunate offspring offer fresh and disturbing images, with which we may, perhaps, be sufficiently stimulated to move forward, towards new forms of life, presence and relation.

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